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New Gatekeepers in Town: How Groups in Social Networking Sites Influence Information Flows in Russia's Provinces

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Abstract

The study focuses upon “city public groups” (“*gorodskie pabliki*,” local newsgroups on social networking sites)—the new entrants in the local media space of the Russian province that have recently become important actors of regional public communication. Such groups combine news posting and citizen discussions, report on local affairs and gossip, and entertain. Some groups are based on user-generated content; others create their own content or act as aggregators. Being non-registered and grassroots initiatives, these media enjoy higher freedom in comparison to official local newsrooms. Given the popularity of city public groups among local citizens and local authorities’ interest toward them, owners and moderators of these media are playing an influential role for local mediated discourse. Based on the gatekeeping theory and its extensions for digital space, this article explores the emerging roles of these new gatekeepers in the local communities. Based upon 28 in-depth interviews collected by the author in Russian towns in 2017–2018, the article also analyses the professional norms and values of the owners and moderators of local city groups that they employ to perform their gatekeeping function.

Keywords

hyperlocal media, digital gatekeeping, networked gatekeeping, Russian media, VKontakte (VK.com), media freedom

Introduction

In December 2013, a murder shocked the quiet provincial Russian town of Arzamas. A 26-year-old man was stabbed in a fight in a café and died in an ambulance on his way to hospital. The town legacy media covered this affair as a domestic accident that resulted from a drunken party (Setdikova, 2013). Social media presented another picture: they pointed out that the café was owned by immigrants from Armenia and the killer was a Caucasian who killed a Russian man because of “national enmity.” One of the main sources of this kind of information was a public group in a social networking site (SNS) VKontakte (VK.com) titled “Ves Arzamas Vkontakte” (“All Arzamas in Contact,” from hereon—“VAVK”). A group comprised several 1,000 subscribers, it posted user videos and photos and stressed the “nationalistic” nature of the murder.

Within the next few days, riots and protest rallies broke out in the town. The participants, mostly teenagers, demanded an immediate investigation of the murder and punishment for the killer. It is worth noting that many protesters were not locals but came to Arzamas on purpose due to the nationalistic nature of the incident (Prusakov, 2013). This case was

covered by all federal media; many of them referred to “VAVK” (Zverintseva, 2013). During these days, “VAVK” gained dozens of thousands of new subscribers. Since then, it has become the most popular public group and the leading media channel in Arzamas.

This is a telling example of the current changes in the Russian local media landscape where hyperlocal media such as “city/town public groups” (“*gorodskie pabliki*”¹) on SNSs become the significant entities of local news production and distribution. Under hyperlocal media, we see “emergent forms of ‘very local’ digital media . . . typically amateur and positioned as an alternative to the mainstream [media]” (Rodgers, 2018, p. 857). In this research, I consider city public groups on SNS to be hyperlocal media because of their nature, amateur and alternative to mainstream media.

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The emergence of amateur or semi-professional hyperlocal media is typical for media landscapes of many countries (Cook et al., 2016). Previous research has indicated that these projects contribute to a sense of belonging and connection within local communities (Hess & Waller, 2016), as well as promote democratic values (Williams et al., 2015) and public engagement (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). Dickens et al. (2015) argue that hyperlocal media seek to address the decline of traditional news media² industries and, thus, are often born out of necessity. In the countries where some areas have experienced a collapse of traditional local media, local news websites can, to some extent (albeit not fully), fill the gaps left in the wake of the disappearance of other media (see, for example, Barnett & Townend, 2015, on the United Kingdom, and Nygren et al., 2018, on Sweden).

Extant scholarly works have actively discussed these transformations in local mediated communication from the viewpoint of the influence upon local journalism (Ekström & Westlund, 2019; Lewis & Molyneux, 2018), including local journalists and legacy media outlets. However, the bias of journalism research toward a focus on professional media and newsrooms (Hess & Waller, 2016) also affects the literature on hyperlocal media. As such, despite their powerful position in the local media sphere, practitioners who stand behind hyperlocal media initiatives, especially in non-Western countries, have rarely been the focus of research. Who are they? Why and how do they lead their projects? How do they understand their roles in local communities and their place within the community of media professionals?

This research seeks to explore how professional norms, values, and practices of owners and moderators³ of local public groups in Russian provincial cities have an impact upon the mediated discourse these groups produce. It also looks at how the output of these hyperlocal media affects the local news ecosystem in general and in the Russian media model characterized by state interference and control over legacy media, in particular. This research employs the theoretical framework of gatekeeping and its newer models of digital and networked gatekeeping.

Hyperlocal Media in Russian Local Media Model

In Russia, hyperlocal media, represented mainly by the city public groups in SNSs, are new but are becoming increasingly popular actors in the local media sphere. The popularity of these groups can be explained by the following two factors: the decline of local legacy media and the importance of SNS in local communication in Russia.

Russian local media are experiencing economic, technological, and professional lags compared to national media outlets. Despite the economic and cultural diversity of the Russian regions, there are two interrelated challenges common for the majority of local media. The first one is their

harsh financial situation and permanent need to struggle to survive. Due to underdeveloped and unbalanced advertising markets,⁴ and long-lasting dependency on the state and other sources of support, financial independence has been barely achievable for the majority of local media (Dovbysh, 2019). Support from local authorities is still their significant source of financing (Dovbysh & Mukhametov, 2020), which constantly puts into question their impartiality and autonomy.

The editorial economy is interrelated with the second challenge—that is, the ongoing crisis of journalistic values. Clientelistic relations with local authorities based on economic dependency and self-censorship have resulted in revisioning by local journalists of whom they serve and what value they create (Roudakova, 2017). These tendencies have alienated the local professional media from their communities and increased the distance between the authorities—and media allied with those authorities—and local issues and actors involved in them (Kiriya, 2020).

In addition, local media professionals still possess a comparatively weak understanding and expertise in the area of digital media, and they demonstrate a little interest in further informing themselves (Erzikova & Lowrey, 2017). Online media are concentrated in regional capitals while, in smaller settlements, journalists and editors still rely mainly on traditional distribution channels. Their strategies on the Internet often have a forced character: they run a website or a group in SNS, but usually these are not developed enough to start to bring revenues and, therefore, are considered secondary for newsrooms (Dovbysh, 2020).

Thus, structural characteristics of the local media system of the Russian regions, together with limited incorporation of web tools into local journalists' routines, create a fertile soil for the development and growth of alternative media initiatives. Internet use in Russia is high and climbing: 78.5% of population use the Internet, 71.8% use mobile Internet, and 27.9% use exclusively mobile Internet (Mediascope Webindex, 2020). Therefore, VKontakte, the most popular SNS in Russia (Kurnosova, 2019), which is also very suitable for mobile use, has naturally become the main platform for such media initiatives.

City public groups started to be established in the late 2000s to early 2010s. This period was when web 1.0 projects like city forums and chats were becoming obsolete (Borodulina, 2018), and, simultaneously, Internet penetration in the Russian regions made desktop and/or mobile Internet available to a significant number of citizens. This made SNSs the main platforms for such groups.

Not only local enthusiasts but also authorities and legacy media started their public groups in VKontakte for local communication reasons. However, the most popular city public groups are run by newcomers rather than by media outlets or press offices of local state bodies. Media outlets usually do not produce separate content for their groups and instead republish materials from print versions or websites.

Local authorities often use VKontakte for publishing official content. These strategies do not fit the nature of SNS, which encompasses interpersonal and two-directional communication, where members of online discussion groups have strong interpersonal feelings of belonging and a shared identity (Wellman, 2001). Also, these projects do not really come thematically closer to the people, nor do they let them have a voice and openly discuss important things.

Being Indigenous to the networked communities, city public groups' owners or moderators reconsider news proximity and bring news closer to people, making them, as Hess and Waller (2016) put it, "excessively local." Popular among local citizens, city public groups are becoming powerful actors within local networked communities. In some cases, as the example at the beginning of this text demonstrates, city public groups can set their own news agendas and shape regional media coverage.

Hyperlocal Media and Journalism

The very existence of local and very local news is not new. Nevertheless, hyperlocal media is a relatively new addition to the local media ecosystems of various countries. What is new is affordances of digital technologies that provide novel ways of not only the production and distribution but also of the consolidation and amplification of such news. In this sense, hyperlocal media not only influence the existing configurations of local media system, affect the agency of professional media outlets, and change local journalistic norms and values but also contribute to a more general re-assessment of news proximity and an understanding of locality and "localism" (Wills, 2016; Wilson, 2012).

Studies show diversity of such hyperlocal media in terms of scale, location, driving forces, quality ambitions, funding, and sustainability (Tenor, 2018; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014). Rodgers (2018) notes that the term "hyperlocal" itself carries no agreed definition. Scholarly discussion focuses more on the composition and values of hyperlocal media than on the more general conceptualization of "local" in relation to media. He proposes understanding hyperlocal media through the following two interrelated approaches: as "involving inherent relationships of place, space, and local" (Rodgers, 2018: 870), on one hand, and as media production practices which itself are aspects of place-making, on the other hand. I find this dualistic approach productive for exploring how norms, values, and practices of owners and moderators of local groups influence the mediated discourse of locality that these groups produce.

An integral part of this scholarly discussion is to what extent small digital newcomers will be able to perform journalistic functions and create a product that would correspond to professional norms of media—and, consequently, what would be the place of professional journalism in local communication in the future (Harlow & Chadha, 2021; Hess & Waller, 2016; Paulussen & D'heer, 2013; van Kerkhoven &

Bakker, 2014). In journalism research, these newcomers are commonly referred to as "amateurs" or "citizen journalists." However, as Ahva (2017) correctly states, these practitioners can hardly be called amateurs, as often they receive financial or non-financial compensation for their work. When it comes to the social structure of local communities, these people often belong to social elites of a certain kind, as they have access to unique information or receive it earlier than others. At the same time, these people often reject being labeled journalists ("citizen journalists" or not), as they are not officially employed by any media organization.

Ahva (2017) proposes calling these newcomers "in-betweeners" of journalism: "[C]itizens who are not professional journalists, yet play a greater role in the journalistic process than mere receivers; they are not the typical audiences, either" (p. 143). She points out that modes of participation and engagement of in-between actors in citizen journalism differ, depending on their motivations, the domain of their activities (public issues, community, cultural life, etc.), and the underlying practices that anchor participation (influencing, belonging, etc.). Tenor (2018) supposes that interpretation of media accountability and professional journalism roles (autonomy, norms and ethics, fulfillment of a public interest) varies among hyperlocal practitioners in relation to their journalistic skill sets and their business orientation. Moreover, practices of hyperlocal media practitioners not only emanate from the culture of journalism itself but are also shaped within the context of the "parent culture" of mainstream media (Hess & Waller, 2016). According to this logic, practices and logics of hyperlocal media practitioners in Russia may vary from other countries (Hujanen et al., 2021).

Due to the still "marginalized" (Hess & Waller, 2016) and secondary position of hyperlocal media within local media ecosystems of Western democracies, little has been said about the influence of these media and their practitioners upon local news agendas. This might be explained by the fact that legacy media retain their status as the main actors of local agenda setting. However, taking into account the increasing role of (networked) publics in news creation and dissemination, as well as the weaker position of local media in Russia in comparison to the Western media model, the significance of hyperlocal media like city public groups in SNSs for local agenda setting and gatekeeping grows throughout Russia and needs monitoring and critical assessment.

The next section discusses transformations of the gatekeeping theory and its applicability to the Russian digital space.

Gatekeeping in Transition: Toward Digital and Networked Gatekeeping

Kurt Lewin's concept of gatekeeping was transferred to communication studies more than 60 years ago by David Manning White (1950). White's consideration of a gatekeeper emphasized the individualized, rationalized selections by a single

journalist (Brown, 1979; Vos, 2015). In this logic, gatekeeping is how different elements (tips, hunches, bits of information) get turned into news and how that news is framed, emphasized, placed, and promoted (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Journalists have long seen themselves as central to the democratic process in terms of information which ensures that citizens are free and self-governing in political decision-making. Therefore, normative journalistic behavior includes the deontology of decent gatekeeping control over news content on behalf of the public at large (Lewis, 2012). The emerging digital media, however, profoundly and permanently affect the nature of gatekeeping by displacing journalists as providers and analysts of civic information (Singer, 2015). Two basic critiques of the gatekeeping model point to the new dynamics of journalistic gatekeeping. These critiques are (1) that space and outlets are no longer scarce and (2) that news production is no longer unidirectional (Coddington & Holton, 2014; Vos, 2015). Another important line of criticism articulates the power of non-human actors—algorithms—as gatekeepers that facilitate user activity, sharing, automated, or collaborative ranking and, thus, become part of many processes in the construction of social reality (Diakopoulos, 2015; Just & Latzer, 2017).

These changes challenge the centrality of journalists and traditional editorial offices in defining political agendas, including the local ones. This article employs two models, namely digital gatekeeping (Bro & Wallberg, 2015; Wallace, 2018) and networked gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Coddington & Holton, 2014; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2016). What are the explanatory possibilities of these models in relation to this research?

Digital gatekeeping is based on the idea that, today, “every individual and every algorithm *could* be a gatekeeper, whereas only a few of them *are* for any given subject” (Wallace, 2018, p. 279, emphasis in original). Therefore, the digital gatekeeping model sees gatekeeping as an iterative news dissemination process. Wallace presents it as a matrix of possible gatekeepers (four types: journalists, individual amateurs, strategic professionals, and algorithms) and their selection processes (three stages: access to information, selection process, and publication possibilities). According to the author, these types of gatekeepers differ in access as well as by criteria for selecting and use of the multifaceted space where content may be published.

Networked gatekeeping inverts the previous top-down model of gatekeeping and highlights the active role of those “whom gatekeeping is being exercised upon” (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1494). Sociotechnical affordances of social media tools enable non-elite, networked publics to direct and influence the flow of information (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2016). As such, the “gated” are active influencers of gatekeeping decisions, rather than merely a receiving entity. As such, network gatekeeping measures the relationship between the gatekeeper and the gated by gauging the political power, information production, and alternatives available

to the latter, as well as the presence of a relationship with the gatekeeper (Coddington & Holton, 2014).

The networked and digital gatekeeping models will be combined in this article to explore how hyperlocal media practitioners perform the gatekeeping process and shape local news agendas. However, some issues of the applicability of these concepts to this research must be addressed.

First, networked gatekeeping highlights the significance of the gated, understood as “networked publics” (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2016). These publics are explained as a power opposite to “elite-driven” traditional institutionalized gatekeepers. Due to this opposition, hyperlocal media practitioners obtain an intermediate position, being neither prominent actors nor networked public.

The digital gatekeeping model, in its turn, distinguishes journalists and individual amateurs, and what makes the boundaries between these two types of actors oversimplified. Wallace (2018) refers to this gap, pointing out that “especially individual amateurs . . . need to be further differentiated into subgroups, as large differences between elites and non-elites are to be expected” (p. 280). Following this logic, hyperlocal practitioners are closer to elitist groups of amateurs.

Moreover, all types of possible digital gatekeepers are still not free from the forces influencing their decisions or the environment they are subjected to (Wallace, 2018). Embeddedness into particular (social) systems shapes gatekeepers’ behavior and leads to different information being publicly visible.

Thus, the analysis below will be organized around the following levels of influence taken from the classic gatekeeping theory with additions from network and digital gatekeeping models: the individual, media routines, organizational (where the SNS and its affordances are also taken into account), social institutional (including relations with the gated), and social system levels.

Methodology and Data Collection

Empirical data for this research were collected during the author’s fieldwork in 2017–2018 in Russian regions. The fieldwork included interviewing local media practitioners—journalists, editors, bloggers, media managers, owners, and moderators of groups in social media and messengers. In total, 82 semi-structured interviews were collected.

Analysis in this article is based on the data of 25 semi-structured interviews with hyperlocal media practitioners—owners and moderators of city public groups in social media and messengers.⁵ The geography of these interviews includes the following four big cities: Tyumen (two interviews), Kazan (four interviews), Nizhny Novgorod (four interviews), Tomsk (one interview)—and the following four towns: Pereslavl-Zalessky (five interviews), Arzamas (six interviews), Lobnya (two interviews), and Kovdor (one interview).

The interview guide included the following three parts: (1) the informants' experience in SNSs, motivations to launch one's own city or town group, and early years of its development, (2) the informants' daily routines and practices of running hyperlocal media, and (3) the informants' reflections on the hyperlocal media sphere in their cities, its functions, and values for the community, and relations with other media and local officials.

Each interview lasted for an average of 80 min. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Processing of the transcribed data was organized as theme analysis (Russell Bernard & Ryan, 2010), with a codebook structured as a combination of "a priori themes" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) taken from literature on gatekeeping, topics relating to the five aforementioned levels of influence, and other themes derived empirically from the data.

Results

Individual Level

The individual level focuses on which individuals are responsible for gatekeeping. Here, one assesses individuals' interpretations, decision-making, personality, background, values, role conceptions, and experiences (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

The majority of people who own or run the city public groups in this sample were professionally socialized within non-journalist environments. In general, their two most common backgrounds were "early users of SNSs" or "people with experience in social media marketing (SMM)." The former are usually young men in their 20s, Indigenous to VKontakte, whose teenage years coincided with the years of growth and maturation of the platform itself.

The latter are people in their 30s who utilize SNSs as a tool for advertising and other marketing purposes. Therefore, unlike that of journalists, their initial interest was the social media platform itself. They claimed they had formed their groups "just for fun" or because of their own needs, as "there was nowhere to read about the town." Many of them, like in case of "VAVK," became popular accidentally, without purposeful effort. The informants noted that the group's popularity came as "a surprise" for them, and they had not planned it from the beginning. Moreover, it happened faster and easier than they expected: "I was thinking to get about 100 subscribers by the New Year, but we got 100 subscribers just in one or two days, and then, gradually, very fast, the group gained popularity" (owner and moderator of a town group, Pereslavl). This fortuitous success forced them to define their own interpretation of their jobs. Many of them are still in the process of defining and assembling how they do things. Some of them have no or very limited reflections regarding their position and functions for their local media ecosystems.

However, when asked for details, the interviewees often construct their identity by opposing themselves to newsroom

staff, in line with the distinction between professional and non-professional. They use such normative notions of the journalistic job as "literacy," "chief editorship," "regularity," and "schedule" to describe what professional media are. It is interesting that the respondents never link proficiency with the idea of "paid work." They, rather, perceive employees of local legacy media as "professionals" because of their embeddedness in a particular system of regular and structured professional activity:

I think the weakness of the city public groups is that . . . the groups do not have staff like mass media outlets. Therefore, the quality of materials might be lower . . . As I understand it, the main difference is that newspapers have a clear structure [and a] chief editor. This is a system that works. (Group moderator, Arzamas)

At the same time, the respondents' understanding of journalistic professionalism is twofold. The absence of journalistic or other experience in legacy media provides these media practitioners with greater freedom and independence to publish content that professional journalists would not publish.

Routines Level

The routines level refers to the practices that media workers use to do their jobs, such as time constraints, reporting and verification procedures, conceptualization of audience feedback, and relationship with sources (Vos, 2015).

According to the data, the practices of owners or moderators of public groups are partly based on those borrowed from professional media and partly on their own ideas how things should be done.

Usually, they choose to abide by trusted and well-known media routines, like fact checking, minimal level of literacy, and exclusion of offensive lexicon; they demonstrate that they reflect upon professional routines. However, their standards might be flexible in some cases. For instance, if a news piece comes with video or photo content, this content might serve for verification. In many cases, it allows town public groups to cover news much faster than the legacy media do it: "When they [legacy media—O.D.] write and publish news, we have already published it several days ago. I mean, we are way faster" (group owner, Arzamas). At the same time, it increases the risk of fake content. The informants do not really care about it—they say they can easily edit or delete entries should there be serious complaints.

Unlike the local journalists who ponder about the public significance of their materials (Dovbysh, 2019), hyperlocal media practitioners decide on whether to publish information assessing it as interesting or catchy or not. They define their editorial policy very vaguely: "We do not have such rules (what to publish or not). We do not publish complete lies or very extreme news, but we do not have very strict rules" (group moderator, Arzamas). The boundaries of "in-line

behaviour” differ significantly from group to group and usually depend on the personality of the owner or moderator. At the same time, once news is published in one group, other groups in this locality will likely repost it, as reposting reduces their responsibility significantly.

The “Indigenous” group routines originate from the moderators’ previous experience in VKontakte. Thus, many of them say they do not have any rhythm in their routines, they are always online. They say they are used to doing this from the period of being “just users” of SNSs.

Organizational Level

The organizational level includes internal factors that vary by organization and, at times, by a group’s decision-making patterns (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, most of the early groups like “VAVK” were established without any specific purpose, whether commercial or public. Groups with particular goals, for instance, commercial groups or official local government groups, were created later, starting from the mid 2010s. Nowadays, all groups can be classified according to several characteristics:

- *Commercial orientation (commercial or non-commercial).* Some groups pursue financial goals while others are non-commercial because of the owners’ position or lack of the investment necessary to generate revenue.
- *Production model.* There is a spectrum of models, from 100% aggregators when a group does not produce any content and only reposts content from other groups or wider Internet, to 100% content producers when a group’s team either generates content itself or publishes content offered by users.
- *Scale.* The group as an organization may vary in scale, from a single-person-operated unit to an entity of several employees.

Usually, groups operate as networked organizations with online-only intra-group communication; however, some groups operate as offline organizations, with work stations for employees at office premises and more traditional ways of intra-group communication. Many owners or moderators prefer to maintain anonymity or, at least, not to be public. One female moderator even acts under a male identity, because, as she argues, “there are certain gender stereotypes . . . that a woman cannot manage a public group properly” (group moderator, Tyumen). In contrast to legacy newsrooms with their planning meetings, communication between editors and content producers, and so on, town public groups are lacking such kind of communication; moderators work autonomously, acting as managers, re-packagers, and curators of news.

Autonomy also influences interaction between groups. Local journalists know each other very well, they meet

regularly at press conferences and other events, and often have previous experience of working together. Town groups, however, do not communicate with each other and, even in small communities, pretend not to know about each other. Surprisingly, the owners or moderators interact more with legacy media professionals rather than with their peers (Dovbysh, 2020). This might also indicate their unspoken wishes to be acknowledged within the professional community and to learn from professional journalists.

Decision-making patterns and gatekeeping practices in groups are also determined by platform gatekeeping. Current research draws attention to the growing role of technological gatekeeping in shaping content production and distribution (Bro & Wallberg, 2015). In the case of city public groups, affordances of VKontakte construct an additional level of gatekeeping. For instance, its current settings allow no more than six advertising posts per day. Therefore, to maximize their revenues, prices for ads in the groups differ depending on the time of publication, for example, “prime time” in the evening is more expensive.

Another important step in platform gatekeeping is the recommendation service of VKontakte called “Prometheus.” This is an artificial intelligence (AI)-driven system based on machine learning and neural networks; it selects unique and interesting content and makes it more visible for users. Prometheus and other algorithms influencing a user’s news-feed represent another level of gatekeeping, when a large-scale and commercialized platform affords or even imposes proprietary algorithmic environments through which the “local” is already being “sifted, sorted, and mediated” (Rodgers, 2018, p. 871).

The Gated: The City Public Groups’ Subscribers

Following the networked gatekeeping model, I consider the agency of audience, or the gated, in the gatekeeping process through a range of proposed key attributes that identify the salience of the gated to the gatekeepers. These attributes include their political power in relation to a gatekeeper, their information production ability, their relationship with the gatekeeper, and available gatekeeping alternatives (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

The information production ability of the gated is high: the group owners claim that local news offered by users is the main source of content for them. Taking into account the lack of financial and human resources for actual reporting, hyperlocal media strive to engage users in information collection. In this sense, the gated can influence the news available to the group.

At the same time, the power of the gated is extremely low at the next stages of the news process. Usually, the owner or moderator individually decides whether to publish the information offered by a given user or not, how to edit or rewrite it, what image (if any) to choose, and so on.

Moderators prefer to perceive themselves as respectable curators rather than oppressive controllers. They stress the

importance of impartiality in gaining the users' respect: "Here, in the groups, pithiness, as I call it, is important. If a moderator does anything, he does it correctly—people must not doubt his actions. For instance, in case of banning someone" (group moderator, Tyumen).

Moderators can exclude any user from the discussions by banning him or her or by deleting or editing comments. One informant says he uses a special script to automatically detect and ban those users who use offensive lexicon. In fact, moderators have extensive power in relation to the gated. As it is said in the rules of one city group: "The moderator is always right! If you think he is not right, see the previous statement." Therefore, the gated are limited by unidirectional relations with the gatekeeper, which can be described as a kind of exploitation of the participatory opportunities for the benefits of one actor.

The gated have a chance to exercise their power over the media entities by having several groups to choose from within one or two SNS platforms (e.g., VKontakte and Facebook). As a rule, there are several big enough city public groups even in smaller cities and towns, so users can easily switch from one group to another. At the same time, outside the SNS platforms, oftentimes there are no alternative suppliers of hyperlocal news. The respondents say that people "do not want to go" outside the SNS platforms:

We made such a news website two years ago and tried to move people, so that they went there from search engines, from the group . . . No way . . . We cannot move people there. They go, see news, read it, and that's it. They never go to the website again. (group owner, Arzamas)

Thus, seeking to serve the gated in a better way and to keep them on the group subscription, the owners or moderators give to the people "what they like." This corresponds to the notion of "direct accountability" of content producers to their immediate consumers, rather than to the society at large (Litvinenko & Bodrunova, 2021). With this type of accountability employed, empowered media practitioners may construct paternalistic relations with the gated by anticipating their demands. This claim is supported by the fact that all the informants could easily determine the most "likeable" or "hype-generating" topics for their towns.

Social Institution Level

The institutional level focuses mainly on the exogenous characteristics of organizations and their representatives who affect the gatekeeping process, for instance governments, sources, advertisers, markets, audiences, public relations practitioners, interest groups, and other media (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Vos, 2015). When it comes to city public groups, the two most influential factors that affect the gatekeeping process are the local governments and the audience ("the gated").

Surprisingly, local officials take the town public groups more seriously than local legacy media do and actively involve them in their communication campaigns (Dovbysh, 2020). Depending on their relations, local authorities either use the town public groups to disseminate information or create their own groups to set their agendas on the platform. In Arzamas, the new mayor gave her first official interview to the town group on VKontakte and only after that to a state-owned newspaper which newsroom was located in the town hall. In Pereslavl, the mayor holds meetings and round tables with bloggers and group owners. In Kazan, an owner loyal to the local elites runs the biggest city public groups. All these activities are attempts to "normalize" relations with city or town public groups on the part of the local authorities, or even to build the new, less controllable media actors into the existing (often paternalistic) patterns of media-government relations.

According to data and field observations, the bigger the group, the closer to legacy local media this group in many respects becomes. For instance, "VAVK," which was very critical in the beginning, later, along with its growth and commercialization, became apolitical. As one group owner claims, they do not want to annoy the local government: "We speak about some bad things but don't really focus on them . . . We are not interested in politics."

Commercial groups are usually neutral and, if they touch upon political agenda, focus on more engaging ("likable," attracting many "likes" and comments) issues of local politics like housing, commodities, roads, waste, and other topics that provoke active reaction of local citizens.

Non-commercial groups are normally more critical and welcome content from various political forces. In fact, these groups are the leading sources for critical political discussions and alternative voices toward the political regime, in general, within the highly censored and self-censored local media landscapes.

At the same time, owners and moderators of both commercial and non-commercial hyperlocal media articulate their interest in providing a place for local people to discuss problems. Despite the difference in direction of criticism (the political regime or everyday issues), both group types serve as digital milieus for local debates and engagement.

Social System Level

The social system level explores the role of social structures, cultural values, attitudes, and ideas in shaping news (Vos, 2015). To discuss these roles, one should place the town public groups into the context of the pre-existing media landscape (Coleman et al., 2016).

The idea of unfree, financially dependent, and backward local legacy media in Russia is publicly discussed by politicians ("V Gosdume obsudili problemy pechatnykh SMI," 2019), scholars (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2018; Romanovich &

Korobkova, 2018, to mention just a few), and media professionals (Gospodderzhka, 2015). The interviews with local editors and journalists often prove that they themselves assess their own performance, as well as their values, as alternative to local legacy media. The contrast to the restrained, municipality-owned, and outdated print newspapers empowers the city public groups within the local media systems: “Neither the local newspapers nor radio will publish the truth. We are the only source of information here” (group owner, Arzamas). Compared to other countries where local legacy media, though experiencing various problems, are still the main media channel for localities (Nygren et al., 2018), the peculiarities of Russian provinces create such conditions when hyperlocal semi-professional media have a high potential to obtain more prominent positions within the local media landscape.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article aimed at exploring the city public groups in VKontakte and their owners or moderators from the perspective of the gatekeeping role in the local media sphere. The primacy of the traditional journalistic organizations in determining what citizens in the Russian regions read, watch, and hear about their locality is now an open question due to the growing salience of such hyperlocal media upon the local mediated discourse. This does not mean that legacy media do not cover topics that are important for local citizens. News agendas of legacy and hyperlocal media often overlap. However, today, they go from hyperlocal to legacy media more frequently than in the other direction, and local newspapers often mark articles published as “actively discussed in VKontakte.” So far, the emerging public roles, professional norms, and political values of hyperlocal practitioners are not clear and remain underestimated.

At the same time, as Wallace (2018) notes, “not everyone who can and does communicate online is relevant enough to construct social reality” (p. 278). The agency of those who stand behind the city public groups, such as owners or moderators who actually control the digital gates within local media space, is reinforced. Their gatekeeping practices and decisions are shaped by factors and forces that differ from those in the legacy media, as analyzed earlier.

Echoing the central question of gatekeeping theory “How does news turn out the way it does?” (Vos, 2015), this research reveals how five levels of gatekeeping affect the performance of hyperlocal media practitioners and their initiatives in the local media sphere.

The *individual level* of gatekeeping shows the importance of professional socialization of practitioners. Having a non-journalistic background, group owners or moderators tend to construct their own principles on what information should or should not be public, what is important, dangerous, or unethical. It is interrelated with the *routine level* of gatekeeping when they borrow some professional practices from journalism but reassemble them according to their own understanding and the platform’s affordances. This

results in a situation when they may publish or withdraw certain information because of individual motives, which goes against the public interest ideal. This does not mean that they aim at manipulating local agendas intentionally. However, it might mean that they influence unintentionally because of underestimation and a vague understanding of their responsibility and journalistic accountability. Moreover, lack of communication between these actors and absence of any professional community of hyperlocal media practitioners leads to a situation when each group invents its own rules, “editorial” policy, and understanding of normativity.

Increasing professionalization affects the *organizational level* of gatekeeping and its interrelations with *the gated*. On one hand, these groups rely significantly on user participation and user-generated content. On the other hand, an owner or moderator usually obtains exclusive power to decide whether to publish the information or not. In fact, owners or moderators have a disproportionately high power over the gated—they not only decide on publications but can exclude or ban users from discussions and alter their participation by deleting or editing their comments.

This poses a new question in the discussion of opportunities for user participation in local news production. Previous research has focused on limitations placed on citizen contributions in local reporting, for example, when citizen volunteers were allowed to cover less important news while more serious news provision was the exclusive domain of professional journalists (Paulussen & D’heer, 2013). This article spotlights another challenge of user or citizen participation that comes from the hyperlocal media themselves and the disposition of power constructed by them.

Lack of a shared understanding of how such groups should perform and whether they have public duties affects their relations with local governments, as analysis on *the social institutional level* reveals. The latter usually frame them as just another type of media outlets. Therefore, local authorities seek to build relations with the group owners using the habitual mechanisms of direct and indirect control and pressure. With time, growth, and commercialisation, city groups themselves tend to get closer to legacy media in terms of their financial sources and relations with local officials.

At the same time, speaking from the *social system level* of gatekeeping, the research finds out that hyperlocal practitioners tend to act as a kind of counter-force in local media sphere, offering an alternative and freer mediated agenda, being closer to local people.

The case of city public groups in Russia’s provinces shows how digital gatekeeping may vary depending on the type of gatekeeper. Despite a previously classification of digital gatekeepers (journalists, individual amateurs, strategic professionals, and algorithms; Wallace, 2018), I suggest that owners or moderators are placed between professional journalists and amateurs. Therefore, their gatekeeping practices are influenced simultaneously by these two identities. The civic identity of owners or moderators is also important:

the distinction between commercial and non-commercial groups is often determined by owner's interest or engagement in local politics. Commercial groups are less critical, though they also serve as places to discuss everyday politics, while non-commercial groups are usually more critical and serve as arenas where various voices and opinions meet.

The "in-between" professional identity of hyperlocal practitioners makes city public groups important actors in local gatekeeping within the peculiar configuration of the Russian local media system. This, in effect, means that news agendas and information dissemination in mid-size towns and even bigger cities today are curated by newcomers to media sphere who came from outside the journalistic community and whose (semi)professional community, as well as practices and norms, is still in the making.

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Notes

1. Here, "pablik" in Russian has little in common with "public" in social sciences. This name came from 2010 when the then VKontakte launched "public pages" ("publichnye stranitsy") in addition to the existing "groups" ("gruppy"). Public pages and groups in the ecosystem of VKontakte used to differ in functionality, while later these differences decreased and the two terms were replaced by one shorter and catchier word "pablik" (Ashomko, 2017). In this text, we use the term "city/town public group" to avoid possible confusion with the two-fold meaning of the word "public."
2. In this article, I use the terms "traditional media" and "legacy media" interchangeably.
3. Since, in many cases, group's owner also acts as moderator, I do not separate them in this research. However, further studies can focus closely on moderators only or owners only.
4. Advertising budgets are disproportionately big in Moscow versus regional capitals.
5. Eight of these interviews were collected on my behalf in four other Russian towns. I am thankful to my colleagues from the club for Internet and society enthusiasts, Higher School of Economics in Nizhny Novgorod, and to Dr Alla Bolotova for their help.

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